

player or computer processor capable of quickly switching between a selection of available advertisement options such that the customer can select his or her favorite advertisements for display. As described above, one preferred embodiment of the invention provides for such a selection through touch-screen capability of at least one of the viewing devices 34 and 38. A menu of available advertisements can be displayed on the viewing devices 34 and 38 with instructions for the customer to touch the portion of the screen corresponding to the desired advertisement. Upon touching the screen, a signal is sent to the output device 50 to play the desired advertisement. Of course, alternative methods of selecting a desired advertisement are contemplated by the invention. For example, a keypad or keyboard could be used to select the desired advertisement. In some preferred embodiments, the output device 50 also has capabilities to randomly select advertisements to be displayed without any input from the customers or to continuously display one or more advertisements in any order desired. In the event that a VCR is used as the output device 50, the tapes containing the advertisements could be looped for continuous running. Multiple VCRs or other output device types could be used to offer and selectively display a number of advertisements from which the customer could choose.

The beverage dispenser 10 is operated such that advertisements are displayed continuously or intermittently and are shown in either a predetermined order, randomly, upon selection by a customer, or any combination of these, preferably during periods when the retail outlet is open for service. In one highly preferred embodiment of the present invention, particular advertisements are displayed after the beverage dispenser 10 dispenses a predetermined quantity of beverage. For example, after one beer is dispensed output device 50 and/or viewing devices 34, 38 are activated and an advertisement is displayed. Then, after every fiftieth beer is dispensed, a new advertisement is displayed. Alternatively, a different video or audio clip can be played each time a beer is dispensed. Special promotions can also be integrated into the present invention. For example, when a consumer purchases the winning one-hundredth beer, a message or announcement can be made that he or she has just won a prize for purchasing the one-hundredth beer. Preferably, such special promotions will involve the customers and add additional emphasis to a particular product. The prizes themselves, such as clothing emblazoned with brewery logos, drink discounts, and the like, can advertise or promote particular products or specials.

Preferably, the beverage metering device 30 keeps track of the amount of beverage dispensed while the retail outlet is open for service. An advertising fee can then be determined based on the number of beverage servings dispensed and/or the volume of beverage dispensed while the advertisements were being displayed. The correlation between the number of servings or total volume of beverage dispensed and the time period over which the advertisements were displayed provides a good indication of the number of customers who viewed the advertisements and thus provides a reasonable basis for calculating the advertising fee. Of course, the present invention can include other methods of determining the advertising fee. For example, a counter (not shown) that is built into or coupled to the output device 50 in any conventional manner can track the total number of times an advertisement is displayed over a period of time, from which the advertising fee can be determined. Such a counter could optionally include a feature that determines and records the time of day the advertisements were run. More sophisticated systems that can track and use any combination of the above-described data can also be used. Regardless of the manner of determining the advertising fee due, the revenue generated by the advertising can be used to offset the cost of the beverage dispenser 10 as will be described in further detail below.

Figure 2 illustrates another preferred embodiment of the invention, wherein the beverage dispenser 10 is located in a retail outlet where large lines are prevalent. For example, the embodiment illustrated in FIG. 2 would be well-suited for use at concession stands in arenas, stadiums, festivals, parks, theaters, tourist attractions, etc. Rope lines 66 delineate customer line boundaries, but are not a necessary feature of the invention. Because the viewing devices 34 and 38 may be difficult to see by customers at the rear of the line, additional viewing devices 70 and 74 can be positioned adjacent to the beverage dispenser 10. For example, viewing devices 70 can be positioned outside the rope lines 66 alongside the line. The viewing devices 70 could also be positioned inside the rope lines 66 and within the line (not shown). Additionally, one or more viewing devices 74 can be elevated above the dispenser 10 and/or the line itself to facilitate viewing by most or all customers waiting in line. The viewing devices 70 and 74 can be of any suitable construction as described above with respect to viewing devices 34 and 38, and are preferably large enough to facilitate viewing by most or all customers waiting in line.

In the embodiment of FIG. 2, the output device 50 is coupled to the additional viewing devices 70 and 74 with connector cables or other conventional wiring (not shown) to display the advertisements being shown on the viewing devices 34 and 38. Alternatively, one or more additional output devices (not shown) could be used to display different advertisements on the various viewing devices 70 and 74. Additional speakers 82 are also shown in FIG. 2 and are connected to the output device 50 via connector cables or other conventional wiring (not shown). Yet another alternative arrangement employs one or more of the viewing devices 70, 74 and/or the speakers 82 without the viewing devices 24, 28 and/or speakers described above with reference to the first preferred embodiment of the present invention.

A flowchart illustrating the operation of a preferred embodiment of the present invention is illustrated in FIG. 3. Once the retailer decides which beverage producer to use, the beverage producer recommends a preferred dispenser provider. The preferred provider can give the retailer the option to purchase or lease either a standard beverage dispenser or the specially equipped beverage dispenser 10 described above. Preferably, the prices of the standard dispenser and the specially equipped dispenser 10 are disclosed to the retailer. Then, the preferred provider preferably explains that if the retailer uses the dispenser 10 to display advertisements in the retail outlet, the base price of the dispenser 10 will be offset, and therefore reduced, by the revenues generated by the advertising fees paid by the beverage producer.

The flowchart shown in FIG. 3 begins with the dispenser 10 being purchased or leased by the retailer (block 100). The lease or purchase will typically involve payments or installments at some regular interval (e.g., monthly, quarterly, annually, etc.). Next, the dispenser 10 is placed in the retail outlet, and the desired output devices 50 are connected to the desired viewing devices 34, 38, 70, 74 and/or audio transmitting devices 82 (positioned adjacent to the dispenser 10) and are made operational to display the advertisements (block 104). As stated above, the size and number of viewing devices and audio transmitting devices can vary for different retail outlets. When the retail outlet opens for service, the advertisements are preferably displayed continuously or intermittently at approved intervals, and either in a set pattern, randomly, or as selected by customers (block 108). Again, the advertisements are